

## Park fees provide for top-notch services

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Nestled along Oregon's Salmon River, the Wildwood Recreation Site offers hikers, picnickers and other visitors a day of exploring the beautiful forested foothills of the Cascade Mountains.

The Interior Department's Bureau of Land Management maintains a variety of facilities at the site, including an environmental learning center, interpretive trails, group picnic shelters and athletic fields. Visitors even can view coho salmon and other native fish species from an underwater viewing area.

The cost for a family using these visitor facilities is \$3 per day, about the price of a cafe latte. This nominal fee is vital to the maintenance of the facility, helping foot the bill for everything from maintaining boardwalks to providing educational materials.

Even at \$3, Wildwood Recreation Site probably is not the biggest entertainment and recreation bargain around. For \$20 or less, the same family can enjoy the spectacular beauty of the Grand Canyon, Yellowstone or many other national parks for an entire week.

As reasonable as these fees are, some critics want them abolished. This would be a great mistake.

The idea that visitors should contribute to the upkeep of facilities they use is not new. Many national parks have charged fees for decades, and 46 states currently charge fees at their state recreation sites. Oregon, in fact, raised \$18 million in 2004 through fees at its state parks.

In 1996, Congress authorized federal agencies on a trial basis to charge people a small fee at national parks, wildlife refuges, national forests and other recreational areas and use them to provide direct benefits to public-lands visitors.

The program worked so well that Congress last year authorized the collection of recreation fees for the next 10 years. These facilities include maintained trails, boat ramps, hunting blinds, toilet facilities and interpretive signs and programs.

The law also calls on federal agencies to develop a national "America the Beautiful Pass," which people can buy to get access to all federal lands where fees are collected.

A key provision of the law requires that fees be charged only in areas that have visitor facilities or services. Those who like to venture into wild areas to enjoy nature with few or no amenities will continue to be able to do so without charge. Furthermore, no one will pay a fee for general access to national forests, grasslands and BLM areas.

No one will be charged to enjoy a view at a scenic overlook. No one younger than 16 will be charged an entrance fee anywhere.

Under the law, the Forest Service actually is removing current fees from more than 400 sites, including 71 in Oregon.

Most Americans recognize that they should pay a fee for some government services and facilities. Taxpayers support the State Department but also pay a \$97 fee to get a passport. Taxpayers pay for road construction, but many state governments charge tolls on turnpikes and bridges.

Americans expect the best from our public lands. Recreation fees help ensure that we can provide the best facilities and services possible.

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